



The EU's Eastern Partnership: Civil society expectations and new opportunities

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Introduction

The European Union's Eastern Partnership was inaugurated in Prague on 7 May 2009. It represents a concerted effort on the part of the EU and six non-EU former Soviet Bloc nations – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus – to upgrade and expand their relationship.

The project is designed to facilitate the political and economic integration of the Eastern Partnership countries, including Georgia, with the EU with the help of various bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs. At the same time, the Eastern Partnership should not be seen as an alternative to the action plans signed by the EU and partner nations within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Instead, it aims to give new impetus to existing cooperation initiatives. At the same time, it must be mentioned that two things make the Eastern Partnership different from past and ongoing cooperation formats.

On the one hand, the scope of cooperation between the EU and each partner country is determined by the scale and progress of reforms implemented by that country.¹ On the other hand, the EU is well aware that civil society can play a special role in the political decision-making process. It was for this reason alone that the Civil Society Forum was founded in Brussels on November 17 2009. The best, most innovative recommendations given by participants in the Civil Society Forum were presented to the foreign ministers of Eastern Partnership member states on 8 December 2009 in Brussels. According to European Commission officials, the recommendations would be useful during discussions on the thematic platforms of the Eastern Partnership.

This policy paper reviews the main objectives and development priorities of the Eastern Partnership. However, as specific cooperation programs for Eastern Partnership states have not yet been prepared and because the process is likely to take a lot of time and effort on the part of both the EU and the partner countries, this policy paper focuses on the recommendations of the Civil Society Forum presented in Brussels in December 2009. These recommendations can shed light on what civil society in the Eastern Partnership states think of the new cooperation format and what results they expect it to bring.

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The Eastern Partnership Project

The last wave of successful EU expansion, in 2004, was a shot in the arm for the European Neighbourhood Policy. Building on this success, the EU decided to strengthen cooperation ties with its 16 eastern and southern neighbours and promote political and economic integration, as well as stability, security and welfare in these countries. The cooperation priorities were set by ENP Action Plans, strategic documents agreed between the EU and each ENP member country. These action plans define short and mid-term targets for political and economic reforms in each partner country and provide a timetable of activities and measures that need to be carried out. These action plans have helped the partner countries, including Georgia, achieve progress in ensuring good governance, social equality, economic development, and the smooth implementation of ENP assistance programs.

To achieve Eastern Partnership objectives, priority will be given to bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs.

The EU's assistance programs for partner countries are based on the proven instruments which were applied in East-Central European states during the enlargement process. The EU also created several new tools.²

In June 2008, at the request of Poland and Sweden, the Council of the European Union instructed the European Commission to expand the European Neighbourhood Policy in the form of the Eastern Partnership. This move highlighted the need for closer ties between the EU and its eastern neighbours, namely Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.³ The European Commission presented the Eastern Partnership, which aims to boost the EU's relations with its eastern partners, to the Council of the European Union on December 3, 2008.

The Eastern Partnership came into force on May 7 2009, at a summit in Prague where EU and Eastern Partnership countries signed a joint declaration. According to the declaration, to achieve Eastern Partnership objectives, priority will be given to bilateral and multilateral coop-

eration programs.

The EU offers each partner country long-term assistance in the implementation of democratic and market reforms which aim to bring economic and political stability. In addition, the multilateral component of the Eastern Partnership can be used as a tool to assist in the implementation of reforms and the creation of a common forum and four thematic platforms for experience sharing among the partner countries.

The EU is ready to start talks with partner countries over Association Agreements within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. This is one of the key elements of the Eastern Partnership. The Association Agreements are meant to be successor documents to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) currently in force between the EU and its partner countries. The Association Agreement sets forth the following priorities for bilateral cooperation between the EU and partner countries:

1. Comprehensive free trade agreements
2. Support for institutional development and administrative capacity building programs in partner countries.
3. The elaboration of Mobility and Security Pacts designed to facilitate travel within the EU for citizens of the participant states and help partner countries combat corruption, organised crime and illegal migration. It also aims at bringing national legislatures closer to European standards; developing efficient and integrated border management/asylum systems and the liberalisation of visa regimes. Special attention is to be given to research into workforce mobility and free access to European labour markets for citizens of partner countries.
4. Measures to bolster the energy security of partner countries include investment into infrastructure, instituting better regulation of energy efficiency and the creation of an early warning system in the energy sector to avoid crisis situations.

The EU will also seek to encourage multilateral cooperation among Eastern Partnership countries. This format of cooperation includes the following main components:

1. Four policy platforms: 1) democracy, good governance and stability; 2) economic integration and convergence with EU policies; 3) energy security; 4) contacts between people.
2. Cooperation in dealing with environmental problems and climate change.
3. The allocation of an additional 350 mln Euro before 2013.
4. Five flagship initiatives for sectoral policy dialogues on the following issues: 1) Integrated border management programme; 2) the energy market, energy efficiency and renewable energy; 3) small and medium size (SME) enterprise facility; 4) diversification of energy supply: the southern energy corridor; 5) the prevention of, the preparedness for, and response to natural and man-made disaster.

The Eastern Partnership also covers security issues. It aims to promote stability and security in the EU's neighbourhood, strengthen ties between the EU and partner countries, improve cooperation, and normalise political relations between partner countries. It also provides for cooperation in the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy,, reinforcement of early warning systems in conflict zones, and cooperation in arms exports and non-proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction.

The progress achieved since 2004 as a result of the European Neighbourhood Policy will have a positive impact on future bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the EU and Eastern Partnership countries.

The scope and intensity of cooperation between the EU and partner states will depend on each partner country's capabilities and resources. To this end, the EU will send a high-profile mission to each partner country at least twice a year to assess each country's progress across the four thematic platforms. Working meetings will be held on issues related to each thematic platform as often as necessary.

It is also planned that the leaders of EU and partner countries will gather for summits once every two years, while foreign ministers will convene annually to assess progress.

The financial aspects and practical instruments of the Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership budget totals 600 mln Euro. It is partly funded by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). ENPI funds account for about a quarter of the Eastern Partnership 2010-2013 budget. All existing ENPI financial mechanisms, including TAIEX and Twinning will be applied to streamline the implementation of the Eastern Partnership project. In addition, the European Commission will establish direct contacts with partner regions through cross-border cooperation programs. The EU will also carry out various investment programs in underdeveloped regions.

Regional initiatives such as Black Sea Synergy

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which focus on environmental protection, energy security, the development of transport networks and the creation of civil society forums are among the potential beneficiaries of the Eastern Partnership. Brussels is expected to become the centre of gravity for such regional cooperation programs.

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According to the European Commission, the Eastern Partnership's budget (85 mln Euro in 2010, 110 mln Euro in 2011, 175 mln Euro in 2012, and 230 mln Euro in 2013) will be spent on the following areas:

- a comprehensive institutional development program for partner countries (about 175 mln Euro, beginning in 2011)
- the piloting of regional development programs designed to address economic and social inequality in partner regions (approximately 75 mln Euro, beginning in 2012)
- the development of multilateral cooperation initiatives (some 350 mln Euro, beginning in 2010).

Between 2007 and 2010 the EU has implemented a number of bilateral programs in partner countries under the aegis of the ENPI. According to European Commission indicators, partner countries received the following funds in the period 2007-2010:

- **Armenia** – 98.4 mln Euro
- **Azerbaijan** – 92 mln Euro
- **Georgia** – 20.4 mln Euro (also given an additional 500 mln Euro for the post-war relief effort after August 2008)
- **Moldova** – 209.7 mln Euro
- **Ukraine** – 494 mln Euro

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Partner countries have also had access to other sources of finance not linked to ENPI over the past few years:

- The **Governance Facility** provides additional EC support for those partners who have made most progress in implementing the agreed reform agenda set out in their Action Plan. The term “governance” is defined broadly, covering such areas as human rights, the rule of law, access to fair trial and transparent and responsible government.
- The **Cross-border Cooperation** strategy includes 15 cross-border programs. Their combined budget for 2007-2013 amounts to 1,118 bln Euro. The cross-border cooperation project has four main priorities:
 - ⇒ social and economic development
 - ⇒ joint response to common challenges (e.g. environmental issues)
 - ⇒ border security
 - ⇒ contacts between people from different countries

Most of the operational programs were approved in the second half of 2008. The first stage of the submission of applications began in late 2008 - early 2009.

- The **Neighbourhood Investment Facility** was created to improve infrastructural

cooperation (in the fields of environmental protection, transport, and energy) between the EU and partner countries. This instrument provides for grants, loans, financial guarantees, capital risks and technical assistance in the preparation/implementation of research projects.

The involvement of civil society in project implementation

In terms of civil participation the Eastern Partnership differs from other EU initiatives. Civil sector institutions from both EU member states and Eastern Partnership countries will be given an opportunity to take part in the project. To ensure the involvement of civil actors in the Eastern Partnership, the European Commission gave its backing to the creation of the Civil Society Forum. Involvement by civil sector organisations from the EU and Eastern Partnership member states will play a crucial role in promoting democratisation and reforms in partner nations.

In accordance with the May 7 Joint Declaration, the European Commission invited non-governmental organisations to register in a common database and take part in the Civil Society Forum.⁴ By September 3 2009, the European Commission had received a total of 439 applications, including 30 from Georgia, 50 from Armenia, 69 from Azerbaijan, 76 from Belarus, 30 from Moldova, 62 from Ukraine, and 122 from EU member states and international networks.

The Civil Society Forum was founded in Brussels on November 17 2009. It brought together about 200 civil society actors – non-governmental organisations, think-tanks, business and professional associations, non-profit organisations, national and international networks and trade unions – from EU and partner countries. The founding meeting was attended by representatives of 22 non-governmental organisations from Georgia, 21 each from Armenia and Azerbaijan, 20 from Moldova, 27 from Belarus, 30 from Ukraine, 30 from international networks, 47 from EU member states and three from Third World countries.

According to European Commission officials,

the Forum will facilitate contacts, dialogue and experience sharing among the civil sectors and governments of EU and partner countries. The tripartite dialogue is likely to concentrate on the following themes: democracy consolidation, good governance, economic reforms, and energy security.⁵ Tripartite cooperation will also contribute to a long-term partnership between the EU and partner countries. Civil societies are expected to share responsibility for EU integration and develop a sense of ownership in the implementation of the planned activities.

The European Commission also hopes that participating civil sector organisations will use their capacities and skills to carry out the following tasks:

- ⇒ develop links with non-governmental organisations in other partner countries and help them play a greater role in their countries
- ⇒ provide technical assistance to partner nations within the framework of bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs
- ⇒ promote the main principles and values of the EU/ENP/Eastern Partnership in partner countries.

Participants of the meeting in Brussels hailed the gathering as very interesting and productive. They said that the EU should treat them as natural partners of both European structures and the governments of Eastern Partnership countries. They made it clear that they wanted to have a voice in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs.

Participants in the Brussels forum defined four thematic platforms and set up four working groups to cover each platform. They also revised initial approaches. For example, the problem of human rights was identified as the most important issue to be dealt with by the first working group. There was also an interest in conflict resolution and in participation in the planning/implementation of the European Commission's instruments and policies (for example the ENPI, DCI and EIDHR).

The following thematic platforms were agreed by the participants: 1) democracy, good gov-

ernance and stability; 2) economic integration and convergence with EU practices; 3) energy security; 4) contacts between people.

In terms of civil participation the Eastern Partnership differs from other EU initiatives.

After the debate on the thematic platforms, the participants came up with specific policy recommendations for the EU and the governments of partner countries. The Civil Society Forum elected a 17-member steering committee made up of representatives of partner countries and EU member states. The steering committee represents the interests of all civil society organisations that participated in the process, not just those that attended the Civil Society Forum.

The proposals put forward at the Brussels forum prompted the decision to create a fifth working group which was tasked with defining the structure of the Civil Society Forum. The Forum also resolved that its first task would be to prepare recommendations for a ministerial meeting held in Brussels on December 8, 2009.

Attitudes of Georgian civil society and recommendations prepared by the Civil Society Forum on the Eastern Partnership Project

The Civil Society Forum presented its recommendations for the European Commission and the governments of partner countries at the ministerial meeting in Brussels on December 8 2009. These recommendations demonstrated that these documents were vitally important for all stakeholders. Most of the recommendations concerned democratisation and the promotion of good governance in partner countries, a very meaningful message to EU members. It means that civil society understands the importance of the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership. This will enable the governments of partner countries to build public consensus on reforms that facilitate political and

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economic integration into Europe.

From the perspective of the Georgian government, the Eastern Partnership is a chance to upgrade Georgia-EU relations, as it offers the country a more ambitious future relationship with Europe. First of all, it means that Georgia can now apply for an Association Agreement with the EU, which will pave the way for a comprehensive free trade agreement and infrastructure development projects. It will also improve the country's chances of gaining a visa-free travel regime with Europe. The strategic priorities of the Georgian state are in full harmony with basic principles of the Eastern Partnership.⁶

Georgian civil society firmly supports the Georgian government's European integration policy. At the same time, the government is widely criticised for not doing enough to fulfil the country's obligations under the European Neighbourhood Policy.

The Eastern Partnership will have a positive impact on the prospects of economic progress and political stability in the South Caucasus.

Georgian civil society activists believe that it is essential that the beneficiaries of the Eastern Partnership include Georgia's neighbours and strategic partners. In their opinion, this will have a positive impact on the prospects of economic progress and political stability in the South Caucasus. At the same time, it is acknowledged that these positive effects depend heavily on the peaceful resolution of the conflicts in the region. Georgian civil society also has specific recommendations for the EU on this issue.

Georgian participants argued that the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war confirmed the fact that the security of the EU's eastern neighbours is crucial for European security. It also confirmed that the EU adopted the right approach when it set out to bolster Europe's security

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through the promotion of stability, security and prosperity along its external borders.

The 2008 Russia-Georgia war sparked considerable anger in Georgia as it significantly worsened the problem of territorial integrity and jeopardised the country's national sovereignty. There are fears within Georgian civil society that renewed Russian military aggression against Georgia is very likely. It means that Georgia has become more dependent on international structures than ever for ensuring its national security and maintaining peace and stability in the country.

The role of the international community in the conflict resolution process has considerably changed, as EU members have become more involved in the peace process (the Geneva process) and increased their activity in Georgia. After the war, both the UN and OSCE observer missions were forced out of the conflict zone. The EU monitoring mission is in fact now the only international mechanism supporting the maintenance of stability in Georgia's conflict zones and the Georgian population's only hope for achieving sustainable peace and stability in the future.

The highly positive attitude towards the EU of both government and society in Georgia is largely inspired by the EU's active involvement in the conflict resolution process. The Brussels forum demonstrated that Georgia and other partner countries faced many common challenges and common tasks, including in the field of conflict settlement.

Before the working groups of the Civil Society Forum began their work, civil society actors made a statement calling upon partner countries to do their best to honour the recommendations of the Council of the European Union and meet the Copenhagen criteria. They also insisted that civil society organisations should be able to take part in the process.

It is interesting that each of the four working groups put forward similar recommendations, including support for democratisation, political/institutional reforms, transparency of the political system, the multi-party democratic process, and the development of local government.

They also identified similar development tar-

targets for every partner country. Including the achievement of good governance, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, access to fair trials and efficient measures to combat corruption.

The representatives of civil society also gave their backing to reforms, both current and future, in partner countries and stressed that fair, democratic and transparent elections, the independence of the media and universal civil liberties must be the main criteria to assess the progress of democratisation in a partner country. Other recommendations included support for the development of new media services and media networks in partner countries.

On peace and security issues, the civil society participants asked the governments of the partner countries to embrace one of the EU's main principles, "democracy is the best security policy", and put common interests ahead of narrow national interests.

The participants also argued for improved economic and social regulatory mechanisms as well as reduced administrative costs, enforced efficient anti-corruption measures, the establishment of a fair competitive environment, a free trade agreement with the EU and the beginning of a dialogue on the European social model.

At the same time, they conceded that almost every partner country lacked an efficient audit system, fiscal policy, a national action plan for sustainable development or a policy on climate change. The civil society organisations expressed their readiness to support "green" businesses, workforce mobility, and the simplification of visa procedures.

On education, the civil society organisations recommended the facilitation of online educational institutions and distance learning centres, and the promotion of vocational and higher education. As for energy security, the participants called for more transparency in energy policy making and the calculation of tariffs, as well as development of joint regional policies on environmental issues.

To assist civil society development in partner countries, participants in the forum suggested that civil society organisations be given an op-

portunity to submit their proposals and recommendations directly to the European Commission and impose civil control over the harmonisation of national and European legislation.

The working groups also recommended the establishment of two Internet-forums to improve communications: one forum for contacts between business associations and the other for the exchange of information and experience among partners interested in the European social dialogue.

The Brussels forum was attended by 21 representatives of Georgian civil sector organisations. Two of them were elected to the steering committee: Kakha Gogolashvili (GEPLAC, Georgian-European Legal Advice Centre) became a working group coordinator and Tamara Khidasheli (Georgian Young Lawyers' Association) was elected as a national facilitator for Georgia. According to the members of the steering committee, the rules and procedures of the committee – including member rotation and the criteria to select the Forum's member organisations – have not yet been finalised. The Forum will probably have improved and streamlined its policies and approaches by summer 2010, ensuring its future efficiency and sustainability. This will raise the legitimacy of the Forum and its steering committee within civil society in partner countries and make it a truly representative body.

Conclusions

The EU has set cooperation priorities, and the scope and intensity of reforms expected of each Eastern Partnership member country. In every country the process will depend on the successful implementation of reforms. This means that all partner countries, including Georgia, are given a chance to establish a special relationship with the EU on the path towards European integration. Civil society organisations within the partner states can also play a significant role in this process.

By creating the Civil Society Forum the EU has clearly signalled that it acknowledges the special role of civil society organisations and considers them natural partners of European institutions and the governments of Eastern

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Partnership countries. Participants emphasised that their contribution would be more beneficial if they had a role in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs.

That is why it is now important for Georgian civil society to become more involved and participate in the planning of Eastern Partnership programs. This will help them to set up civil monitoring and assessment missions in the future to oversee the implementation of national action plans.

It would be also useful for Georgian civil society to assume a greater role in the implementation of reforms in the country. This can be achieved with the help of: 1) the Civil Society Forum's thematic platforms and being part of networks of local and international civil institutions; 2) capacity building in the monitoring/assessment of reforms; 3) raising awareness of the principles and priorities of the EU/ENP/Eastern Partnership.⁷

The following communication mechanisms

created by the Civil Society Forum will be instrumental in this respect:

1. The website of the Civil Society Forum will give all stakeholders free access to bilateral and multilateral official documents/agreements/policy papers written by EU institutions and national governments. The stakeholders will be able to upload their comments and research to the website.
2. National facilitators and working group coordinators will be in charge of communication between civil society organisations, National Government and the European Commission.

Overall, the Civil Society Forum opens up new opportunities for civil society, both in Georgia and in other partner countries. It offers them the chance to take part in a tripartite dialogue (involving the EU, national governments and civil society) and contribute to cooperation between partner countries and European integration.

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¹ Joint declaration of the Council of European Union and Eastern Partnership countries, May 7, 2009. <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/applications/search/newsDocDetails.asp?cmsid=650&dockey=107589&doclang=EN&lang=EN>; Council of Europe report on South Caucasus, December 8, 2009.

² ERussia is not a member of the Eastern Partnership. However, according to European Commission's statements, this project in no way intends to harm Russian interests. Russia remains one of EU's strategic partners, and a new comprehensive Russia-EU partnership agreement is under development at present.

⁴ August 31, 2009, was set as the deadline for submission of applications. Later, however, it was extended to September 3, 2009.

⁵ Benita Ferrero-Waldner, EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, 'Civil Society Forum Strengthens the Eastern Partnership', SPEECH/09/538; 17/11/2009

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/09/538&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

⁶ Speech of the Vice Prime Minister of Georgia, State Minister NPI, Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF) and Governance Facility

³ for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Mr. Giorgi Baramidze, European Parliament, November, 2009

eu-integration.gov.ge/uploads/SpeechinStrasbourg.doc

⁷ Research conducted in Georgia has shown that Georgian civil sector organisations lack detailed information about EU-sponsored projects and programs in Georgia. Interviews with leaders of non-governmental organisations in July 2009 revealed that there are no information campaigns or professional discussions on the substance of programs and the obligations taken on by the government as part of these programs. The interviews also aimed to find out what non-governmental organisations know about the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument and about ENPI-funded programs in Georgia. In 2007-2009 all interviewed non-governmental organisations were actively involved in monitoring the EU-Georgia Action Plan and prepared annual reports for the EU on the implementation of the Plan. The overwhelming majority of the respondents stressed that they did not have an opportunity to take part in the development of the ENPI's 2007-2010 priorities and stated that they were notified about the priorities post factum. They also did not participate in the planning stages of the 2007-2008 and 2009 ENPI annual programs. Their capacities and resources were limited, and they were unable to deliver their opinions and comments on the planning/implementation of ENPI programs to the European Commission and the government. Four of the polled organisations claimed that they made their voice heard through direct contacts with representatives of the European Commission and government officials. Non-governmental organisations usually encounter various problems during the monitoring/assessment of programs. The following problems are seen as most serious: there is little information in public domain, information is often outdated, public servants lack competence and are moved too often, the law on the budget is revised sporadically and the government rarely pays attention to monitoring results.